



Moral sentiment predicts desire for Scottish independence

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ABSTRACT

Scottish independence has been a topic of considerable political debate for some time, with the 2014 referendum concerning whether Scotland should remain a part of the United Kingdom testament to this fact. Numerous economic and political factors have been noted as determinants of the referendum vote. However, the role of psychological factors as a predictor of the desire for independence has not been well explored despite much work demonstrating the importance of specific traits and values on a range of socio-political attitudes. In the current study, using a sample of Scottish adults ($n = 271$), we sought to examine how two core constructs capturing moral sentiment – binding (reflecting concern for group cohesion and norms) and individualizing (reflecting concern over individual rights) – predicted the desire for independence during the build-up to the referendum. Results indicated that lower binding and higher individualizing predicted a desire for independence, with evidence for mediation via Scottish identification. These findings are consistent with the notion that the Scottish independence movement can be viewed as a broadly left-wing phenomenon. More generally, these results provide novel evidence in a charged political debate that moral sentiments concerning how individual and group life should be structured play a significant role in explaining individual differences in political sentiment.

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1. Introduction

Nationalist movements tend to spark considerable debate. The Scottish nationalist movement has been no exception to this trend in recent times, perhaps best illustrated by the 2014 referendum concerning whether Scotland should remain a part of the United Kingdom.¹ The factors that underpin sentiment on this question are numerous, and include economic and political concerns, among others. Less well explored are the psychological factors that underpin attitudes towards independence. In the current study, we sought to test whether moral sentiment concerning individual rights and group cohesion (Haidt & Joseph, 2007) predicted desire for independence during the build-up to the 2014 referendum. These moral domains are of considerable relevance in this debate because they have been shown in recent work to predict important socio-political attitudes (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Lewis & Bates, 2011; van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). More broadly, while important work has examined how psychological traits predict election voting (e.g., Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006), it is still relatively atypical for psychological variables – and particularly

moral sentiment – to be tested in the context of a major socio-political event, and thus such an approach provides a window onto the psychological factors underlying important real-world political issues. In addition, we sought to examine whether Scottish identification and essentialism served to mediate the path from moral sentiment to independence views.

1.1. Scottish independence: historical overview

The Acts of Union signed in 1707 served to forge an alliance between England and Scotland and saw the end of a significant period of conflict between the two states. While the Union has remained intact now for over three centuries, in recent decades there has been movement towards the reestablishment of a separate Scottish nation, distinct from the United Kingdom. The Scottish independence referendum of 2014 represents the culmination of a long journey undertaken by Scottish nationalists who, by and large, believe that Scotland suffers economically and politically under UK central government. Such matters are of course disputed as with any live political debate, and the variation in sentiment towards independence from the Scottish people no doubt reflects the different perspectives individuals hold on these issues. For example, one recent opinion poll on the economic future of an independent Scotland showed attitudes ranged from those who are confident

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¹ Note, the outcome of the referendum was unknown at the time of writing.

of prosperity (c. 20%) to those who are worried about economic decline (c. 40%) (“If Scotland Became Independent...”, 2014).

1.2. Socio-political attitudes: the role of personality and values

While political and economic factors will likely explain a significant proportion of this variation in Scottish independence sentiment (e.g., the belief that greater national wealth or political muscle will follow from independence), it is less examined how psychological characteristics relate to desire for independence. This is unfortunate as a considerable body of research has found that stable aspects of personality and values predict important socio-political attitudes. For example, the personality trait Openness has been shown to predict more liberal attitudes across numerous studies (e.g., Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Lewis & Bates, 2011), with evidence (albeit it somewhat mixed) for further contributions by other Big Five personality traits (Lewis & Bates, 2011). At the level of values, right-wing individuals (at least on social issues) tend to show support for strict law and order, a need for rigid structure in society, and a high desire for discipline within society (Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan, & Shrout, 2007). Caprara et al. (2006) found that right-wing voters show a high desire for values such as security, power, conformity and tradition in societies. It is noteworthy, however, that recent work has suggested that personality traits do not exert a causal influence on political attitudes (Verhulst, Eaves, & Hatemi, 2012), although this work did not address causal relations between values and political attitudes.

Of special interest to the current study, Haidt and Graham (2007) have suggested that moral sentiment is a critical precursor to the political positions individuals adopt. Their most well-studied model of moral sentiment includes five core foundations: harm/care (minimizing harm to others), fairness (maximizing fairness to all), in-group loyalty (the importance of the in-group), authority deference (respect for status and hierarchy), and purity/sanctity (avoiding impure or disgusting acts/entities, in part with regard to religious notions concerning such issues). These five facets of morality, in turn, correlate to form two higher order moral factors of ‘individualizing’ (the aggregate score on harm and fairness) and ‘binding’ – the aggregate score on authority, in-group loyalty, and purity (Graham et al., 2009). Both individualizing and binding have been shown to account for significant variance in broad-based political orientation in both the United States and United Kingdom (Graham et al., 2009; Lewis & Bates, 2011) and in The Netherlands (van Leeuwen & Park, 2009), with lower individualizing and higher binding tending to reflect greater levels of political conservatism in each of these countries.

1.3. The current study

While moral values have been shown to predict socio-political attitudes in fairly general terms in a number of recent studies (e.g., Graham et al., 2009; Lewis & Bates, 2011; van Leeuwen & Park, 2009), the Scottish independence debate facilitates a fascinating test of the role of moral sentiment as a predictor of political attitudes in an important real-world issue. If individual differences in broad-based moral sentiment are indeed a core factor underlying socio-political conflict, as suggested by Haidt and colleagues (e.g., Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007), it will be important to establish the impact of such moral sentiment across a range of socio-political contexts.

The lens of moral values also has considerable value as a means to characterize the psychological aspects of the Scottish nationalism movement in more nuanced ways than previously detailed. Whereas nationalism is often noted to reflect right-wing characteristics (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998), Scottish nationalism has typically been regarded, at least broadly speaking, as a left-wing movement

(e.g., McCrone & Patterson, 2002)². This gives rise to interesting possible relationships between desire for independence and moral sentiment. On the one hand, if one considers desire for independence within the typical psychological analysis of nationalism – i.e., right-wing – one would predict that high binding and low individualizing would significantly associate with desire for Scotland to leave the Union. Conversely, if the desire for independence reflects the motivation to generate a more left-wing political state, one would make the reverse predictions; namely, low binding and high individualizing predicting desire for independence. Finally, one might expect that desire for independence might be more nuanced still, reflecting aspects of right-wing sentiment – i.e., concern for group cohesion and authority – coupled with heightened concerns over social justice. In such a case, the prediction that emerges is that desire for independence reflects high binding and high individualizing.

Our goal, then, in the current study was to test whether these central aspects of moral sentiment predicted attitudes towards independence, and the nature (if any) of these associations. We were also keen to assess how aspects of Scottish identification and essentialist thinking (i.e., perceiving that Scottish people have an essence that is immutable and fundamental to the character of Scots) related to desire for independence as well as whether these variables mediated associations between moral values and desire for independence. To address these questions we recruited a sample of Scottish individuals who were asked to complete an online survey addressing desire for independence, general sentiment towards Scotland, moral sentiment, and key demographics.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

352 Participants (271 participants included in the final data analysis: see details of exclusion criteria below) were recruited with an average age of 35.95 ($SD = 16.66$) and an age range of 16–82 years. Participants were recruited from undergraduate students at a mid-size Scottish University (who gained course credit for their time) and from relevant, targeted sites on social media (e.g., Facebook) where Scottish independence was a topic of discussion. Non-student individuals who participated in the study did so voluntarily. Although we did not formally record the breakdown of our sample with regards to student vs. non-student, more than 65% of the individuals in our sample were over 22 years of age indicating we sampled from a largely non-student population. Only participants who self-identified as Scottish ($n = 304$), as opposed to English, Welsh, Northern Irish, or Other, were included in our analyses so as to focus our analyses on those individuals most central to the referendum. (Non-Scottish residents in Scotland are permitted to vote in the referendum; however, because their length of stay in Scotland was not measured here we reasoned it was better to omit these individuals). We also excluded participants who were undecided in their independence vote ($n = 38$: see details below), which left us with a sample of $n = 271$.³

2.2. Measures

All measures were taken in one session in an online questionnaire between November 2012 and February 2013, which was

² The Scottish independence movement is not alone among nationalist movements in being regarded as left-wing: Several other such movements – including the Quebec and Basque independence movements – share similar features, although both contain complexities that mean parallels cannot be easily drawn.

³ Note, some of the participants met exclusion criteria in both conditions and so the final sample size is marginally larger than the simple omission of sum of the number of individuals in each of the excluded groups.

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